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The Minute Man

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His buddies, colleagues, church friends and siblings describe him as humorous, friendly, optimistic, energetic, tall, selfless—almost to the point of self-degradation—generous and compassionate, Troy Jansen lives in the moment.

By Carrie Boyd

Photo by Shing Kai Chan

As the assistant director of the Ames Emergency Residence Project, Jansen logs long, hard-working moments at the three-fold, Story County residence assistance project.

An overnight shelter for single, traveling men makes up the second floor of the white, two-story house on Kellogg Avenue. Zoned as a night shelter, the overnight men can only stay up to two weeks on one of 16 bare mattresses covered with thin blankets, leaving during the day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"Then, it's pretty much things that can make you feel like a new person, you know?" Jansen says. "Getting stuff for a shower, or getting a meal, or a change of clothes or a chance to do laundry. We show them where their beds are and then kind of take things as they come."

The residence project was extended (and the stipulations on staying were refined) as the shelter was forced to repeatedly turn away travelers and families from the shelter.

"We had to decide, are we going to help the first 16 people that came for a long time and turn others away? Or are we going to help as many people as we could for a short time? We needed more family area," Jansen says.

Families in the project's six, transitional-housing apartments pay rent based on their income, but are encouraged to transition out of the shelter's apartments within two years—the average waiting list for low-income or subsidized housing in Ames. Jansen says a majority of the shelter's visitors are between homes due to a shortage of affordable, efficiency apartments in Ames and a lack of boarding houses.

"If we can keep kids with their families in their apartment so they don't have to move again, so they don't have to change schools again… There's a big of a stigma having had been in a shelter sometimes, you know? Not to mention just the keeping the utilities on so they can be warm."

And according to Jansen, that still wasn't meeting the needs of people in Ames or Story County facing eviction or "falling through the cracks and needing help."

A third element of the project, a prevention

fund, was established to help Story County and Ames' residents pay their rent or utilities. Limiting the fund to each family one time per year lets new families each month receive rent or utility assistance, an objective that helped more than 1,500 Story County dwellers last year.

"And a lot of those 1,500, those include kids," Jansen adds.

When a new traveler visits the shelter or fills out an application for transitional housing, an immediate rundown of policies gives future residents an overview of the shelter's rules, and gives Jansen and his boss, Vic Moss, a general idea of their situation—mostly for state documentation, but also to make sure the Ames' shelter is the "right fit," Jansen said. "I got a call this morning and somebody wanted to check into the shelter, and as I talked to her a little more, [I found] it was more of a domestic violence situation. We can provide some level of security, but not as much [as necessary]."

The project's $300,000 operating budget comes from state funding—both through FEMA grants and individual grant requests—,the city of Ames, United Fund drives, and over half of the funding comes directly from donations from Story County residents. "Do you have brothers?" Jansen asks as we climb the brown, shag-carpeted stairs to the makeshift boarding room upstairs. "It smells like boys up here…a little locker room meets musk meets work sweat." Jansen chuckles.

A majority of the men that cycle through the shelter are transient travelers who are working, but being paid less than a livable wage, or are looking for work—usually in temp services. "We get the newspaper here, and we ask them to pound the pavement," Jansen says.

"The phrase we hear a lot (from the men especially) is 'just trying to get back on my feet'. And we try to, while they're here, delve into a little bit about what knocked them off their feet…sometimes it's things beyond their control—like being laid off during these economic times, or just having a job that didn't make a living wage. And just a combination of other things, you know, choices that they're not proud of."

He touches on the widespread stereotype of the migrant, homeless alcoholic, but only to refute it. According to Jansen, alcohol—whether past or present use—is only an issue for approximately 20 to 25 percent of the single, transient men who use the project's resources. A similar percentage struggles with some form of mental illness.

"That was probably one of the stereotypes that went out the window when I started working here. They're not all struggling with alcohol or drugs—by God's grace, drugs have not been a problem here."

Of the project's six transitional housing apartments, five are occupied—although the sixth, having just been vacated the night before, is inquired about during my interview. "Our turnover is about 24 hours for each apartment," Jansen tells me.

He slowly, yet capably and confidently, strips grimy sheets from rollaway beds and collects trash. (I can't help but notice the baby diapers and child's sword toy left behind in the small, cramped apartment.)

"In my mind, a homeless shelter…I just never pictured three-day-old babies. The youngest person we've had here was three days old and came right from the hospital. Whereas, the stereotype for me was always the guy with the beard, kinda scruffy, camping out. I mean, you drive by the single, [homeless] person and think 'ah well, they brought that on themselves', and some of that is true sometimes, maybe. But, the three year old had nothing to do with the situation that they're in. "

Jansen, a gangly, 40-year-old guy in black, faded jeans and an old winter coat, earned an undergraduate degree in elementary education from Wartburg College via Ellsworth Community College, and his calling—working with children—is evident as he rattles off the names and ages of all the children in the shelter's transitional housing apartments.

""I feel like I represent the 470 people that came here last year, so I don't want to forget and not talk about the kids that are coming through here. [That family has] three girls, 5, 7 and 9…three daughters, they're 14, 10 and 7. They have four kids, 6, 7, 2 and ten."

After graduation, Jansen taught for four years before continuing his education at Iowa State in elementary guidance counseling. An article in the Iowa State Daily sparked Jansen's interest in the Ames Emergency Residence Project, and Jansen applied for a part-time job.

"I feel like time is all we really have in life and [Troy's] given up his time far more than we've asked him to keep this place running," says Vic Moss, director of the Residence Project and Jansen's boss. "We simply couldn't fund this place if we had to pay him for every hour he gives us."

After a few months, Moss combined the part-time positions into one, full-time assistant director position and offered Jansen the gig.

"I sort of put graduate school on hold at the time," Jansen says. "I thought I would [work for] about a year, but that was about 12 years ago."

But Jansen doesn't feel like he's given up on teaching or counseling.

"I don't have a class [here], but just as questions come up, or those 'teachable moments'. Find those teachable moments where you can teach a lesson. I get to combine a little bit of teaching, plus the counseling here. We can talk about how life is going as we walk down the street maybe towards Dairy Queen. I kind of like that better than some of the more formal counseling you would do in the school. Like the one-on-one setting? That always seemed a little artificial.

"The other day the kids were playing school. I got to be the principal…it was a big day," Jansen says, chuckling to himself and settling deeper into one of the shelter's rugged armchairs. "But a typical day? Long story short, there really isn't a typical here. But, just when I think there's something typical (or stereotypical) about it, then the situation comes that I've never seen before. And I'm just prayin' that I say the right things and do the right things, ya know?"

The youngest of seven children, Jansen says growing up in his large, Christian family has a direct bearing on where he is now and his outlook on life. "Faith was important. And being thankful for what you had."

Jansen's older sister has Down syndrome, but lives in a group home with three other women and house parents. Another older sister contracted a fever as a child that

left its mark in the form of some learning disabilities—"we just called it 'slower,' back in the day," Jansen says—from the high temperatures. As an adolescent, the same sister began showing the cosmetic effects of neurofibromatosis, a disease that leaves fleshy, benign tumors on the cranial nerves, contorting facial features and basic sensory perception.

"I learned early on that you focus on the positive," Jansen says, "what a person can do. You're aware of what they can't do and you always consider limitations, but you don't dwell on those."

And Jansen breaks his own mold. He strides with an off-kilter gait—a permanent kiss of cerebral palsy—leaving one footprint and one blurred line in the fresh snow on his way to the shelter's crawlspace-turned-two-room apartments.

"I was born with cerebral palsy two, two and a half years after my sister with Down's syndrome. My parents—with any of us kids—never dwelled on any of the limitations, never said 'you can't try this because you might get hurt'. They always let us try things and let us realize what our potential was…but they were realistic with us. None of us were going to be pro athletes or anything," Jansen jokes.

"As I was growing up, I didn't think consciously every day 'I have cerebral palsy'. It didn't affect me in a way that I was down about it. It wasn't on my mind all the time. Being negative about it has never led to anything good."

Under the feet of three older brothers, Jansen says "I quickly [learned] what the words 'pity' and 'sympathy' meant, but it was always used sarcastically when they were picking on me or something. Anyway, you don't dwell on the negative too much." He trails off.

"One of my biggest fears—not [to sound] arrogant like I have a lot planned or a great future—but, one of my fears is probably not reaching my potential."

Jansen's a native of Parkersburg, Iowa, and his mother's home of 20 years (and Jansen's childhood home) were destroyed in the F-5 tornado touchdown in late May 2008, while homes across the street—mere feet away—stood unscathed.

"Just in the last six months my perception on things has changed, too, a little bit. How quickly things can be wiped out and how we're not in charge…God's in charge and we're not. He can decide what we have and what we don't. He decides where the wind stops. We just don't take anything for granted, even the next day."

In work at the shelter, Jansen says he doesn't "preach outwardly" but hopes that guests are comfortable enough with him and he's approachable to share things of a "personal nature or a spiritual nature."

…it's nice to pop in a rerun of the Andy Griffith Show—I'm an avid collector of Andy Griffith Show memorabilia—or Mayberry, which can't be much more opposite than what we usually see on a weekly basis at the shelter.

"He's pretty deeply religious and I think he takes to heart some of these things about being a 'brother's keeper' and that sort of thing," says Moss. "That's the kind of attitude we want here, compassion to other human beings. I think Troy deserves some recognition."

"How do I say this without sounding overly spiritual?" Jansen asks. "Because I'm not… God's been gracious to me and merciful to me and I don't mean to make it sound like—my faith is important—but to make it sound that it's always the most important thing? That might be wrong for me to say that."

But according to some of Jansen's friends, his strong, Baptist faith is one of his greatest attributes (second only to his upbeat attitude and sense of humor).

"[Troy] is as honest as the day is long, and he works hard to help those in need and keep himself growing in his knowledge and love of God through Bible studies and prayer," says Erik Russell, Jansen's college roommate at Wartburg and a friend of 20 years. "His attitude doesn't waver much. [He's] always easygoing and pretty upbeat most of the time."

"I think my friends would describe me as someone who likes to laugh and make other people laugh without hurting anyone, laid back, probably, but serious at the appropriate times," Jansen says. (Author's note: The day following the interview, Jansen called to admit that he is also "rarely punctual" and a "slob at housekeeping").

A self-proclaimed 'slob,' oddly enough, Jansen spends most of his week at the shelter, sweeping and vacuuming the house, folding laundry, answering phone calls, accepting applications, and, if it's a night he has to cook, 'creating the finest in déjà vu cuisine, a.k.a. leftovers.'

Some nights during the week, Jansen, void of a wedding band or any children, stays over at the shelter, sleeping lightly to answer the doorbell or phone should someone need help during the night.

"I'd like to have a family someday. Either way, my future will probably involve people, since I'm pretty terrible with machines," Jansen laughs to himself. "As much as I do like time to be alone like everybody else does, I think I do a little better [around people], thrive a little better, gain energy from other people."

Starting Thursday morning, his schedule revolves around the people and happenings at the shelter.

"Usually the first time to get away and do something not shelter-related is Sunday morning for church. But, just to have your mind on other things is kind of nice. I mean, I'm always thinking about families here on my days off (Tuesdays and Wednesdays), but it's nice to pop in a rerun of the Andy Griffith Show—I'm an avid collector of Andy Griffith Show memorabilia—or Mayberry, which can't be much more opposite than what we usually see on a weekly basis at the shelter."

The hardest part about Jansen's job is not the late nights, however, but the incessant phone calls or never-ending laundry to fold.

"Probably the hardest part is a combination of not being able to be everything to everybody and having to ask someone to leave to leave the shelter," he says.

"Want to know my favorite part of my job? It probably has to be when a new family moves in and that first time where they see the open apartment and get to run around in it. To be able to have moments like that? There are just enough moments like that to make it worth it."